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THE DUTIES OF THE HEAD NURSE

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THE use of the name, "head nurse," is somewhat ambiguous, sometimes implying the head or superior nurse in an institution, and again the nurse in charge of one department of that institution.

The latter meaning is the more common of the two, and it is the one to which this paper will limit itself.

In our modern hospitals the demands made upon the head nurse of a department are numerous indeed, and the woman who holds that position must be gifted with patience and trained not only in nursing, but in various other sciences. For instance, she must be capable of weighing correctly the characters of those with whom she comes in contact, and of making due allowance for each particular weakness or peculiarity. For her own sake, as she passes along, she should be able to absorb to herself lessons from these same shortcomings, or if by chance a strong individuality come in her path, of drawing strength from that character for future need.

She must be skilled in the knowledge of housekeeping, knowing to a nicety the amount of milk, tea, butter, or sugar to give the individual patient at each meal; the particular polish to be used in the cleaning of silver, copper, or brass, and the way each should be applied; the most approved style of cutting garments for men, women, and children in hospital wards; the newest method of preparing and serving each article of diet, with all the other details of keeping house.

In addition to knowing all these and many other things, she must have the art of imparting that knowledge to others, of making others as skilled as herself.

In the hospital organization which is most approved by modern authorities the head nurse of a department is responsible directly to the superintendent of nurses, who again must answer to a higher authority.

Each head nurse is responsible to the head of the nursing department for the good nursing of the patients and for the general management of the ward or other department, including the housekeeping and cleanliness, the supervision and direction of maids and orderlies, the conduct, good work, and training of the pupils, the work and department of nurses on special duty, and, in fact, of everybody and everything which may be concerned in the every-day work of the department.

So that the executive part of the institution may run smoothly, the head nurse must have demands made upon her from the executive centre,—the office,—and must be capable of some clerical work.

She has not only to manage her one department successfully, but in such a manner that it will form part of a united whole—not standing isolated by itself, but in touch with the other departments; and although in many ways it is independent, in still more ways it depends for its smallest requirements on those other departments.

A woman who would be a successful head nurse must have grasped the right idea of living; must understand thoroughly the relation in which she stands to others; must be broad-minded, generous in her judgments, susceptible to influences which elevate, but beyond the reach and incapable of being tainted by harmful ones.

She should have a strong individuality, capable of taking a stand and abiding by it, for if she have not, she, with the rest of her department, will be driven here and there and finally stranded.

The character of the head nurse puts its stamp upon the whole department and those in it. If she herself has learned the lesson of self-government, has cultivated the quality of tact and uses it, that fact is plainly manifested to the initiated by an atmosphere of peace and contentment among the patients, the nurses, the domestics.

How different from this is the moral atmosphere which strikes one on entering the ward of the self-absorbed woman. This ward is managed not on principle, but according to the feelings of the head nurse. She has a headache or is upset—the whole ward knows it. The junior nurses and probationers try to hide eyes disfigured by all degrees of redness; the patients are silent and have a distressed appearance; the maids go around on tiptoe; the doctors make rapid rounds and depart abruptly; the head of the school pays her visit and retires feeling uncomfortable and dissatisfied.

The head nurse herself does not realize, possibly may never know, the harm she is doing to herself and others, the opportunities for good which she is losing.

In our modern school for nurses the position which the graduate head nurse should hold is that of an officer of the school. At the present

stage of progress in hospital organization the recognition of the head nurse is doubtful. This is probably due to the fact that until late years graduate head nurses were unknown—pupils filled these positions, and continue to do so in many hospitals.

We will hope, however, that before long this will be rectified, and that the head nurse will receive the official recognition which is her due. Before that time arrives, however, there is much preparation to be made, both on the side of the school and the side of the head nurse. The head of the school must be given time to learn to think of the head nurse in this new capacity; to come down off her own pedestal and accept the head of each department as a co-worker; to cease to merely issue orders, but to consult and advise with her staff of officers. This all means a revolution of thought for the superintendent, so she must not be hurried too much.

On the part of the head nurse there is also much preparation necessary. If she is to become an officer of the school, a greater loyalty must be shown to the head of the school than is always the case at present. She must take the trouble to find out the policy of the school and the ideas and wishes of its chief officer and follow those wishes. She must herself assist in the effort of raising the dignity of the position of head nurse by dignifying the individual position by her personality.

A large part of the practical training of the pupil devolves upon the head nurse of a hospital. Of this fact each head nurse should be glad, for we know that by attempting to teach others we find out how much we ourselves really know. One way of educating ourselves is to attempt to impart our knowledge to others, for in that way we soon learn our weakness.

This work of training and teaching the pupil nurse in her department is as much a part of the head nurse's duties as is the care of the patients, the carrying out of the doctor's orders, and the many other details of the work.

If a head nurse is to be held responsible for the way in which a young nurse starts her practical training, naturally that head nurse will herself wish to instruct the pupil in all details, instead of delegating that privilege to some other pupil a little further advanced in her training.

In a large, busy hospital, where there is much work to be accomplished, everybody is so busily engaged with the practical work of the institution that at times all are apt to lose sight of the fact that there is an educational aspect to be remembered. We frequently forget that pupil nurses are not in the wards merely to take care of the patients, but also to learn. In fact, from the pupil's point of view the sole object

of her being in the hospital is an educational one, and this point a head nurse in particular should remember.

There is no doubt that the duty which the head nurse owes to the pupil is at times a trying one, but it is nevertheless a duty. On the other hand, a head nurse, if she go about it the right way, may herself gain much from the self-control and discipline which she is thus compelled to exercise.

Without self-control the head nurse cannot do either herself or the pupil justice. The nagging head nurse who scolds from seven in the morning to seven at night, who never fails to point out the poor quality of a pupil's work, but forgets to say a word of encouragement occasionally, does not succeed in obtaining the pupil's best efforts. She does succeed in making the pupil fear and dislike her, but, as a rule, does not secure her respect.

The head nurse who goes to the other extreme and is carelessly lax in her discipline, showing partiality to some of her nurses, or even making chums of them, fails also in winning the respect of her nurses.

If we are going to succeed as head nurses, we must strike a happy medium between these two examples. If we would win the respect of our pupils, we must show ourselves worthy of their respect—we must earn it. We must learn to be just and impartial in all cases; to avoid carefully nagging and scolding, and to substitute in their places teaching and correcting and guiding. We must appreciate the fact that we must practise what we preach, for if we wish the pupils under our supervision to adopt certain methods, to maintain a certain deportment, we ourselves must set them the example; they will follow our example, not our precept.

Other duties comprised in those usually allotted to the head nurse are those which she owes to the members of the staff, to the patients, —other than the usual nursing,—to the patients' relatives and friends, to the public. In fact, the list seems never-ending. The nurse as head nurse, like the nurse on private duty, seems to be public property, and must make strenuous efforts to live up to everybody's expectations.

If, however, we as graduate head nurses wish for more privileges, for more recognition from the higher powers, we must show ourselves capable of meeting all these demands. If we wish our positions to advance with the general advancement in nurses' schools, we must bestir ourselves.

Upon us alone depends the degree of dignity which accompanies the term "head nurse."